

Smashing the Gateway: The Internet and the Mass Media

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A Reluctant Geek Academic Guide Sample

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Author's Notes

Before computer networks changed the way in which information was distributed, most people relied upon mass media print and broadcast news for their information. The people who controlled the mass media industries became very powerful because of the monopoly they held over information flow. But they had their critics, two of whom were Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, who published their criticisms in the (in)famous book *Manufacturing Consent*, which described how those in control of the mass media were manipulating information flowing into the public sphere. This article describes how the internet and related technologies have changed the way in which we get our news, and broken the stranglehold that the mass media had on information flow in democratic societies. It begins with an examination of Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model before demonstrating how computer mediated communication can circumvent the information filters that the model describes. If you enjoyed this ebook, look out for *Jürgen Habermas and Deliberative Democracy*, *John Dryzek and Deliberative Democracy*, *Deliberative Democracy Basics*, *Deliberative Democracy Essentials*, and *Online Narratives*. All of which are available through Amazon, The iBookstore, Smashwords, and all good ebooks vendors.

CMC and the Capitalist Mass Media

Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that the capitalist mass media industries, prior to the proliferation of computer mediated communication technologies (CMC), were instruments of domination within democratic societies in which they had monopolised the public sphere. They identified the methods of domination within their propaganda model. This guide will demonstrate that CMC offers viable alternatives to the capitalist mass media through the channels and forums it provides for public and private communication. CMC is not an agent

of domination itself, nor a medium of communication that readily lends itself to methods of domination. The discussion begins with an analysis of the propaganda model and then examines the ways in which CMC forums and channels offer an alternative to older communication technologies such as print and audio/video broadcasting.

The Propaganda Model

Even though Herman and Chomsky concentrate on the US media, the model they outline is valid for most non-government Western media because they face similar forms of financial pressure that shape their day-to-day operations. Aspects of the model are also applicable to communication media outside the developed world. Publicly funded news services such as the broadcasting commissions of the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and many European countries are not subject to the same pressure to turn a profit but they do need to allocate their resources carefully in order to produce an adequate news service. These public news organisations are, however, susceptible to pressure from the governments that provide the funding for their existence. The Australian ABC, for example, has suffered numerous budget cuts from successive governments (Barr, 2000, p. 64), often accompanied by pressure from government officials in the form of threats of more cuts should they displease people with 'biased' reporting of information (2000, p. 68). During the 1998 Australian Federal election, the Liberal-National Coalition lodged seventeen formal complaints with the ABC, alleging political bias in its reporting (2000, p. 69). During the same campaign, the Australian Labor Party, as well as some ABC staff, became concerned over the glowing praise that ABC Chairman, Donald McDonald, heaped upon Australian Prime Minister John Howard of the Liberal-National Coalition at a Liberal Party fund raising function (2000, p. 69). In a single election period, both sides of the Australian political spectrum had condemned the ABC and led ABC staff to believe they could not expect kind treatment, regardless of which party won the election. Even publicly owned media outlets, therefore, are not immune to the pressures that filter and shape information dissemination through the mass media in the Western world.

The propaganda model consists of a variety of 'filters' that influence the gathering, presentation, and publication of information by the press, radio, and television. These filters are rarely overt pressures placed upon the agents of the media by interested parties. They are

usually more subtle, taking the form of dogma and unconscious adaptation of certain modes of thought (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. xii). According to Herman and Chomsky, propaganda disseminated by powerful sources within a society sets the agenda for information gathering and distribution. It is not that corrupt forces hell-bent on twisting, perverting or withholding information from the population systematically taint the sources of news in general. It would be naive to imagine that the rich and powerful gather periodically to plot the course of society until the next meeting. Rather, the framework within which public discourse occurs in Western Democratic societies has been set by powerful groups and actors within society, and any deviation from this framework meets reactions that range from discouragement to exclusion (1988, p. xi). The system is circular; the media disseminates the propaganda and, in turn, the propaganda influences the individuals working in the media. In essence, the propaganda model is a self-perpetuating system that establishes and maintains a structure for the dissemination of information to the public through the mass media.

The Filters

Herman and Chomsky establish five major filters that act upon the media while it is engaged in its quest to collect and disseminate information to the public. The filters are:

1. Size, concentrated ownership and profit motivation
2. Advertising
3. Sourcing of news
4. Flak
5. Anti-communism as a control mechanism

The filters work by suppressing, perverting, or diluting information in order to make that information fit into the prevailing social and political framework.